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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on efforts of several states in the southern United States (Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia) to respond to the mandate for training early childhood special education professionals. The paper describes how teacher certification standards are being met in these states and examines the role of the state departments of education. The paper concludes that there is some continuity in personnel preparation delivery programs, but each state quite clearly has its own process and present level of commitment. Issues of concern are noted, such as too much diversity in "add-ons" and "endorsements" to masters level early childhood special education certification, the need for central coordinating agencies for service continuity, and the need for additional inservice training. (JDD)

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Personnel Preparation in Early Childhood Special Education: A Southeastern Perspective

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Personnel Preparation in Early Childhood Special Education: A Southeastern Perspective

The past decade has witnessed a rapid growth in public demand for comprehensive early childhood education programs that serve children with special needs. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142) paved the way for the passage of Public Law 99-457, the Education of the Handicapped Ammendments of 1986. This enactment directs local education agencies to serve children, ages 3-5, who are developmentally delayed or "at-risk" for future problems. Although many states already provide preschool services for children with handicaps, other states are in the process of developing and/or expanding their early intervention programs. As discovered with PL 94-142, one of the biggest challenges of the new legislation will be to respond to the immediate need for additional highly trained educators. It is essential that teachers working with special needs children have preparation that reflects not only practical experiences but also an educational foundation based on current research and the latest strategies in early childhood special education. Those

in the best position to implement or expand personnel preparation programs are institutions of higher education cooperatively working with State Departments of Education.

The following is a report on how several SACUS states are responding to the mandate for training early childhood special education professionals. Each university based author describes how teacher certification standards are being met in their respective state, and examines the role of their State Department of Education. This article will also address the following 3 fundamental considerations of teacher preparation:

* What training model is most appropriate? Should students be trained in a developmental, remediation, intervention, or a special education model?
* At what certification level (undergraduate or graduate) should training take place? What are the advantages/disadvantages of each position?
* Should there be "add-on" endorsements attached to existing special education or early childhood certifications, or is

a "free-standing" program the most appropriate method?

Alabama

The State of Alabama recognizes that young children with special needs require teachers with specialized training. For several years, Alabama has credentialed educators in the field of Early Childhood Education for the Handicapped (ECEH). There are presently four graduate level programs (Masters and Ed. S.) in the state. Certification at the undergraduate level is not available.

Students seeking admission to the Masters or class A certification program must possess an undergraduate teaching certificate in early childhood, elementary, or any area of special education with the exception of gifted/talented. The prerequisite teaching certificate to the Ed. S. program is an A level certificate in ECEH. Both certificates allow educators to teach handicapped children ages 0-8 years. Course requirements are illustrated in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Alabama State Department of Education (SDE) plays a significant role in the development of teacher education programs. Colleges and universities who wish to offer certification in ECEH must construct their teacher education programs according to strict standards promulgated by the SDE. Program approval requires an on-site review by SDE personnel who approve not only the course of study, but the faculty who may teach within the proposed program. SDE influence extends to the point of a particular course being designated as meeting the intent of a specific regulatory teacher education standard. Faculty are evaluated on the basis of their professional preparation and teaching experience.

An issue encountered by teacher educators in Alabama is the existence of, essentially, a dual track toward certification in ECEH. Most Master's degree programs require approximately 36 semester hours of credit. Students who complete a state approved program are eligible for the A level teaching certificate. However, teachers who already possess an A level certificate in elementary, early childhood, or special education, and desire to add an endorsement in ECEH, can request an analysis of their academic preparation

by the SDE. A "deficiency letter" is mailed to the student outlining the minimum course requirements, usually 9-15 semester hours, that she/he needs to complete in order to be certified to teach young children with special needs. Universities thus find themselves having two different student populations enrolled in the same course. A corollary of this dual system is the issue of "product reliability." Are teachers equally prepared? Our young preschoolers with handicaps will, ultimately, provide the answer. For their sake, let's hope for an affirmative response.

Florida

Currently, in Florida, there is no State Education Department certification available that addresses the preparation needs for teachers of preschool handicapped children. Certification exists, however, for early childhood education (Nursery-Pre Kindergarten [N-PK] and Kindergarten-Third Grade [K-3]), special education, elementary education, and specialty areas. A certification that would address the unique requirements for teachers of preschool handicapped children, integrating both the early childhood

components and the special education components, is sorely needed.

A draft of a Preschool Handicapped Endorsement has been circulated and discussed for some time in Florida. The status of its adoption is unclear. The draft stipulates that, for the holder of an exceptional education or preschool (N-PK) education certificate, 12 additional semester hours would be required in the areas of (1) development and implementation of instruction for the preschool handicapped child, birth to five years, with emphasis on evaluation (formal and informal) and developmentally appropriate curriculum and methods; (2) typical and atypical child development; and (3) family collaboration, family systems theory, and community resources. One criticism of this endorsement draft is that 12 semester hours of preparation is not enough to train teachers to meet the special needs of this population. Another criticism of the proposal is the add-on or additive aspect of the plan. Preschool handicapped children are a unique population, not an additive of early childhood or special education, and therefore require unique preparation.

The University of South Florida, as well as several other institutions of higher education in the state, offers a Master's degree in Preschool Handicapped Education. This advanced degree is a collaborative preparation program in curriculum and instruction with a focus on early childhood education and exceptionalities. The completion on this degree, however, does not lead to any certification in the state of Florida.

In an effort to retrain existing certified school personnel, the Florida State Department of Education provided discretionary grants to state universities in the Summer of 1990 to implement preschool handicapped institutes for the retraining of professionals. These institutes provided training for teachers currently teaching in early childhood or special education classrooms. The University of South Florida received one of these grants and offered an institute on Transdisciplinary Training for Preschool Personnel. The institute, in cooperation with the Departments of Early Childhood, Special Education, and Speech Pathology provided the option of either retraining hours or graduate credit for the participants and addressed the special needs of preschool handicapped children.

As Florida and other states continue to develop plans to both change and develop certification paths for teachers of both typical and atypical preschool children, one issue or concern that needs to be kept foremost is that of what constitutes early childhood. According to The National Association for the Education of Young Children, early childhood consists of birth through eight years of age. Certification standards that address only the child from birth through age four or five critically jeopardize the continuity necessary for success as the child enters the primary years. Continuity and continuation of developmentally appropriate experiences for both the typical and atypical child are crucial as the child grows intellectually and develops lifelong learning skills.

Another issue is that certification paths need to be futuristic. Currently, public schools serve all children K-12, some high risk 4 year olds, and some special needs 3-5 year olds. In the very near future, schools will be serving more and more of the preschool population in both the atypical and typical arenas. Certification paths should address this future need for public school personnel. Certifications that delineate a break between preparation of teachers of birth - 4 or

5-year-olds and teachers of the primary years do not recognize the similarities of learning needs of the preoperational learner (2-7 year olds) nor the needs of schools to have personnel that are flexible in the early childhood years.

As Florida and other states strive to provide for the educational needs of all children, teacher preparation programs must be proactive rather than reactive. Professionals in the field of early childhood education have much to offer and will need to be advocates for all learners whether handicapped, high risk, or typical.

South Carolina

The development of plans to implement P.L. 99-457 in South Carolina have raised a number of issues which must be successfully resolved if the law is to benefit children as hoped. Issues such as funding and the definition of "at-risk" are common problems and will not be discussed here.

Currently, South Carolina has no initial certification in special education or early childhood special education. Teachers interested in working with young handicapped children may obtain endorsement in

generic special education or one of seven categorical areas such as learning disabilities or visual impairment. Teachers must be certified in either early childhood, elementary, or in a field of secondary education. Endorsement in special education may then be added on in one of three ways. The first method is to successfully complete 21 semester hours of prescribed courses and the National Teachers Examination. There is a proposal before the State Department of Education to include early childhood special education in this add-on program. A second avenue is the Master of Education degree which is available from a number of colleges and universities. Thirdly, degrees in Special Education Administration are available from the senior universities in the state.

The University of South Carolina has a fourth proposal before the Commission on Higher Education for initial certification at the graduate level in early childhood special education, early childhood, and elementary education. These proposed Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) degrees and certification offer a partial answer to the dilemma of needing to rapidly

train a cadre of teachers and at the same time ensure that they possess the requisite teaching skills.

The Department of Health and Environment Control (DHEC), which has historically been responsible for children's health, will assume responsibility under P.L. 99-457 for infants and toddlers. Under the P.L. 94-142 the responsibility for children 3-21 was given to the State Department of Education. This division of responsibility has caused concern as to the ability of the state to provide a continuum of services because the history of large agencies attempts to coordinate services sometimes includes confusion and gaps in service. A handicapped child and his/her family will be under the jurisdiction of an agency (DHEC) with a social services orientation towards supporting the entire family as they raise their special needs child.

When the child becomes 3 years old, however, he/she will come under the jurisdiction of the State Department of Education with its orientation toward the child's individual educational progress, rather than a focus on the whole family. The child and family will be faced with a new set of regulations and policies with a new professional team and a new emphasis. This transition represents the potential for confusion,

disruption of services, and even regression on the part of the child. Proponents argue that this potential for disruption is recognized by both Departments and that special efforts must be made to ease this transition. They also argue that three years of age is a natural transition period in the life of the family as the child begins to develop interests outside the home. Properly educated teachers should be able to assist the family through this transition period.

Unfortunately, properly educated teachers required for this task are in short supply. A statewide shortage is predicted for teachers who are prepared to provide the services prescribed by law (South Carolina Teacher Recruitment Center, 1989). The South Carolina Department of Education has a sophisticated system of certification, program standards, and accreditation which is in place and should make the addition of new areas of certification and services for children fairly easy. The Department of Health and Environmental Control has no cadre of trained teachers and will resort to contracting for services with other agencies and private companies.

Another issue has to do with the role of the early childhood special educator. There is some notion that

their primary responsibility will be to manage the numerous services special needs children and families will receive rather than providing direct services. If their role is to be a "therapy coordinator" then a relatively low amount of training should prepare them to manage the bureaucracy of providing services. If their role, however, is to provide direct service, for example, they will be responsible for knowing both the medical and educational implications of the various handicapping conditions, thus requiring a more in-depth education.

A related issue centers on "add-on" endorsements for early childhood special education. The current proposal calls for 12 hours or four courses. Twelve hours to add an endorsement is a common pattern except that the courses are typically in one discipline. It is difficult to accept that the proposed early childhood special education training could adequately prepare a high school English teacher, for example, to lead a team in preparing an IEP or IFSP and implementing a quality program for a 3-year-old with cerebral palsy. If the individuals, however, who receive this endorsement will not really be expected to

teach, but rather to be a "therapist coordinator" then the preparation may suffice.

Another area of concern regards those professionals who are already in the field. Early childhood educators have a long history, stemming from the Head Start era, of working with children who are at-risk for future learning problems. Many teachers of young children feel relatively comfortable in working with these "at-risk" children, however, working with children who have handicapping conditions is a new experience. Any teacher who has graduated from an accredited program within the past decade has at least an introductory knowledge of special education; yet, many teachers feel inadequately prepared to receive children with handicaps into their rooms. A systematic effort to bring regular classroom teachers up-to-date on the law, techniques for mainstreaming, working with parents, interdisciplinary program planning, in addition to other areas is needed.

Texas

The Texas legislature reformed teacher education in 1987. The training of educators was radically changed as a result of this reformation. The terms

teaching and education were deleted from the repertoire of professionals. The concept of teaching fields was replaced by "delivery systems" and the field of early childhood education became known as "interdisciplinary studies".

Students may no longer major in education. They must first complete the requirements of a core academic discipline such as History or English and then they may choose a "delivery system" that is limited to a maximum of 18 hours of coursework in professional education - including student teaching! Previously, an education major required 36 hours of coursework.

Information on teaching young children with special needs is infused throughout the "interdisciplinary studies" program. The state allowed this plan to use a 24 credit hour professional core.

Students may substitute special education for their professional core or delivery system. The focus, however, is on generic special education. At the master's level, students may continue their generic focus or prepare to become diagnosticians. Consequently, credentialing or certification in early childhood special education is nonexistent.

Virginia

As part of the restructuring of teacher education programs in Virginia, institutions of higher education were given the option to prepare prospective teachers in four or five year programs. All prospective teachers, however, must successfully complete a bachelors degree in liberal arts and sciences as a requirement for initial certification. Those choosing the four-year approach must limit their programs to 18 hours of education course work (excluding clinical experiences). In these programs, education is essentially a minor. Universities opting for a 5-year program have no limit on required education hours and students typically complete a second major in education and earn a masters degree. Of 17 special education teacher preparation programs in Virginia, 8 are four year programs. Six of those programs have received special permission from the Department of Education to require additional course work and students now average between 20-24 hours of education credit.

The Early Childhood Special Educator designation is an endorsement on an existing early childhood education or special education certificate.

Requirements include the following:

1. Two years experience as an elementary or special education teacher.
2. Successful completion of 30 semester hours or the equivalent at the upper or graduate level.
3. Successful completion of a student teaching component of at least 6 semester hours. Students must have experiences in both home-based and center-based programs for preschool handicapped children.

Course requirements are identified in Table 1. One result of restructuring is that graduates of five-year programs who wish to be endorsed as Early Childhood Special Educators will have to complete the equivalent of a sixth year of education.

Former Governor Gerald Baliles named the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services (DMHMRSAS) as the lead agency for P.L. 99-457 in Virginia. DMHMRSAS was already responsible for 40 preschool handicapped programs and a lobbying effort was formed to support DMHMRSAS as the lead agency. Presently, DMHMRSAS is responsible for Part H of P.L. 99-457, programs for children 0-36

months. The Department of Education (DOE) is responsible for Part B programs, those for 3-5 year olds. However, since Virginia already had state mandated programs for 2 year old children prior to P.L. 99-457, both the DMHMRSAS and DOE operate programs for 2 year-olds. The DOE sponsored programs must meet both DMHMRSAS and DOE guidelines while DMHMRSAS sponsored programs only have to meet DMHMRSAS guidelines. (Virginia has asked for guidance from the federal government on this issue.)

Department of Education sponsored programs require that teachers hold the Early Childhood Special Educator endorsement but there is no comparable certificate for those working in DMHMRSAS sponsored programs. Presently, there are two initiatives underway to ensure the competence of professionals working in the field. "Important Components of a Personnel Development Plan" is a report that was developed by the VA Interagency Coordinating Council, the body formed by the governor to give advice to the DMHMRSAS. The document focuses on the need for a comprehensive system of personnel development as addressed in the Personnel Training and Standards section of P.L. 99-457.

Subsequently, the DMHMRSAS awarded a grant for the development of a comprehensive training policy for preservice and inservice education and technical services. The objective of the policy is to provide individuals with a "certificate of permission to practice" based on the meeting of certain performance objectives.

Summary

The above samples of teacher education programs that attend to certification in the area of early childhood special education vary greatly. While there is some continuity in personnel preparation delivery programs, each state quite clearly has their own process or present level of commitment. All authors have issues of concern regarding the status of their State Department of Education and their university based certification programs. In summation these issues are:

1. States vary as to locus of control for P.L. 99-457. There is now a diversity of affiliated state agencies that deal with the various transitions and services needed to work with the special needs child. A coordinating central agency is a must if there is to be continuity in all services provided

to the handicapped child and his or her family. Personnel must be in "developmental harmony" and have an interdisciplinary approach as children move along the continuum of needs and program provisions.

2. With various avenues open to obtaining a teacher certificate there is no preparation equality. With variations of "add-ons" or "endorsements" to comprehensive masters level early childhood special education certification, such diversity makes one suspect of "product reliability." Paralleling this is "faculty reliability." As in any professional area of concentration, teacher certification faculty for early childhood special education must be chosen based on professional preparation and teaching experience.
3. Teachers who are already in the field need to be brought up to date on laws, research, curricula issues, management techniques, and other issues related to working with handicapped children in integrated settings. A current avenue for providing inservice as well as preservice training is via Federal grants for personnel preparation training programs.

Conclusions

As provisions for mandatory services for handicapped children under the age of five grows, the need for professionals to work with these children will also grow. While a greater quantity of educators will be needed, it is the quality of personnel that will be crucial to program success.

This overview of the 5 SACUS states makes us keenly aware of the diversity in personnel preparation programs in early childhood special education. As states coordinate their agencies to accommodate P.L. 99-457, State Departments of Education must coordinate certification programs with their teacher training institutions.

While each state struggles to meet the mandates of P.L. 99-457 we may need to consider expanding our focus. Presently, each state, with respective certification institutions, have options for flexibility in developing personnel training programs that create individual uniqueness, capabilities, and standards. Keeping in mind, though, the best interest of special needs children, their families, and early childhood special educators, we might want to consider establishing unified, consistent certification

guidelines that cut across state boundaries. A standard certification structure would facilitate reciprocity among states, thus casting stability for transient families and educators; would help establish stability and continuity for special needs programming within schools/childcare facilities; and would strengthen the relationship between early childhood special educators and the field of education in general.

A unified regional effort could indeed be heavily influenced by early childhood professionals representing each SACUS state. It is an effort and direction worth considering.

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